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EXPOSITORY AND PRACTICAL STUDIES ON THE LIFE OF CHRIST

I. THE BIRTH OF JESUS ANNOUNCED TO THE SHEPHERDS

LUKE 2:1-20

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

This passage leads directly to the thought of the significance of Christ to the world. To hide this great subject behind petty questions of the accuracy of the man who tells the story would be an absurd procedure. An intelligent teacher of the Bible, however, ought to know that three problems of history are here. (1) Was there a decree of enrolment of the Roman world in 6-4 B.C.? No other reference to such enrolment is known, but the argument from silence is not conclusive. (2) Quirinius was governor in 6 A. D., ten years after this date. Has Luke predated his governorship, was he twice governor, or is there still some other solution? (3) Would an enrolment have been made at the home of the distant ancestors of a family, or at its actual place of residence?¹

The angels' song in vs. 14 presents a variation of text, recorded in the difference between the Authorized Version and the Revised Version. The Revised Version text is supported by all the great codices, and by most of the early versions and the church fathers.

II. EXPOSITION

A characteristic of this passage is the element of picturesqueness in the story, appearing in such phrases as: "abiding in the field" (vs. 8), the single picturesque word; "keeping watch" (vs. 8), "watching their watches by turns;" "stood" (vs. 9), a word rare in the New Testament, except in Luke and Acts, but common in classical Greek for divine appearances; thus Homer says: "A beautiful dream stood at his head;" "the glory of the Lord" (vs. 9), a startling word, the *shekinah* of old Hebrew tradition, the symbol of the presence of God, come back once more, now that the Messiah has been born; "I bring you good tidings" (vs. 10), one word, from which we have "evangelize."

There is a group of terms which, in the Jewish Christian story as Luke

¹ These questions are treated in Plummer's *Luke*, briefly in Farrar's *Luke*, and, from different points of view, in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, articles "Nativity" and "Quirinius," and in Hastings' *Bible Dictionary*, articles "Quirinius" and "Jesus Christ" (Vol. II, p. 386).

found it, must have had special reference to Israel as the people of the Messiah, but which he, with his tendency to think of the mission of Christ as broader, probably universalized in his thought: "To all the people" (vs. 10); "to you" (vs. 11); "men in whom he is well pleased" (vs. 14).

III. SUGGESTED TEACHINGS: GOD'S METHOD OF REVELATION

1. God did not break with the old to reveal the new. The mission of Christ was far larger than the Jewish messianic hope, yet God respected that hope. Revelation of new truth through Christ always builds upon the old, be it in church creed, in personal life, or in social interpretation of Christianity.

2. God enlarged the old hope. As the meaning of the new revelation was seen, the old Jewish terms had to take on a wider meaning, as Luke enlarges them in this passage. Human expectations are never as large as divine realizations. How long would Christianity have lasted if it had not outgrown its first Jewish bounds? How long will it last now unless we enlarge its social significance? Are we satisfied with the range of life which it affects at present?

3. Christ came in the least expected way. There had been many speculations about the Messiah. Not one of them pictured the way he finally came. He who is awaiting the coming of Christ in the world may well be open-minded to the unexpected.

4. Christ's coming was announced to humble souls engaged in honest toil. So later Christ gathered his disciples from toilers. The best way to prepare for new revelations of the meaning of Christ is to do the duty of the present day. It may seem humdrum. What has watching sheep to do with angels' visits? Yet still, as then, the angels come to the patient watchers by humble tasks.

5. God's revelations call for response. The shepherds went to see. Fresh interpretations of the meaning of Christ come to us like angels' visits. What do we do with them?

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II. THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

MATT. 2:1-12

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

(1) The two nativity narratives (Matt. 1:18-2:23 and Luke 1:5-2:39) form no part of the main synoptic tradition, and differ from each other in important points. They probably did not belong to the substance of

early apostolic preaching, and took form later than the body of the gospel story. (2) The Magi are not described as to number (tradition affirmed both three and twelve) or place of residence (Arabia, Persia, Parthia, Babylonia and even Egypt have been named). (3) The star has been explained as (*a*) a phenomenon attending the conjunction of planets (Kepler calculated that Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction in 7 B. C.; Pritchard has attempted to show that there were three conjunctions between May and December of that year); (*b*) an evanescent star (Wieseler claims the support of Chinese tables for the appearance of such a star in 4 B. C.); (*c*) a comet, or (*d*) a dramatic embellishment of the narrative, growing out of the character of the wise men, as students of the stars, whose visit may be supposed to have rested on astronomical observations. (4) The Hebrew text of Micah 5:1 (2) quoted in vs. 6, reads: "But thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, (though) little to be among the thousands of Judah, (yet) from thee shall come forth to me he that is to be ruler of Israel." The insertion of a negative in the New Testament rendering, though apparently reversing the meaning, in fact only brings out the real intent more clearly. The language here quoted is an announcement in poetic phraseology that the Messiah was to be of the house of David.

II. EXPOSITION.

The name "Jesus" corresponds to the Hebrew "Joshua," meaning "Savior." "Herod the king," known as Herod the Great, was the son of Antipater, an Idumean, who, through Roman friendship, became governor of Judea. Herod, made king of Judea in 37 B. C., died in 4 B. C. The birth of Jesus occurred therefore some time before the latter date. The "wise men," magi, represent the learned class in the East, devoted, among other things, to the study of omens by observation of the stars. By "King of the Jews" (vs. 2) is meant the Messiah. Many Jews were living in the East, whither exile had carried their ancestors. The messianic hope was cherished among them, and may have been communicated to others, not Jews. The rumor of another king would disturb a jealous tyrant like Herod; the fear of Herod's anger and of the strife of rival kings would alarm the city. The Sanhedrin, the chief assembly of the Jews, would naturally be appealed to for information derivable from the Scriptures. The movable and special character of the star is manifest from vs. 8. One must suppose a unique phenomenon or regard all reference to the star as traditional. The family appears here to be resident in Bethlehem. It was only later that Nazareth was chosen as a home (vss. 22, 23).

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMON: THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD AT THE FEET OF CHRIST

The central thought of this story is that Jesus, fulfilling the Old Testament promises, is yet not the Christ of the Jew only, but of the nations also.

1. The prophets of the Old Testament, believing the Jewish nation to be the elect people of God, and blending patriotism with religion, looked for a prince and savior who should rule Israel in righteousness. It is this hope of a golden age in the future that in large part gave dignity and worth to the life of the nation. In the century just preceding the birth of Jesus the Jewish poets still sang of this hope.¹

2. This national hope, never realized, doomed to repeated disappointment as concerns its national and political elements, found in Jesus a fulfilment of its nobler, its purely moral and religious, elements. Jesus the fulfilment of the ideals and predictions of the prophets is a prominent theme of New Testament preaching and notably of this gospel.

3. Jesus not only left behind the political elements of the old hope; he broke the bands that bound it to Judaism also, and became the Messiah of the nations. For this larger conception of Jesus Paul strenuously contended. It was largely to defend this conception that the gospel of Matthew was written (see 28:19). It is this which the evangelist sees forecast in symbol in the coming of the Magi from the East.

4. Christian history justifies the claim of Christianity to be the religion of the nations. The culture of the world bows its knees to Christ. The power of the nations in vain opposes his progress. That we are ourselves Christians illustrates the adaptedness of his religion to non-Jewish peoples. Christianity has proved its fitness to be the world's religion.

5. Today again Christianity faces the question whether it shall become the world's religion. What are we doing to make it such? What are we doing to hinder its being such? The Jew of the first century threw himself across the path of Christianity on its way to becoming the world's religion. Many Christians desired to keep it a Jewish sect. If Christianity is to become the world's religion it must be because the Christianity of today is fitted for the task. Are we making it such?

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¹ Read Psalms of Solomon, 17, in the edition of Ryle and James.

III. THE BOYHOOD VISIT OF JESUS TO JERUSALEM

LUKE 2:40-52

I. EXPOSITION

Much turns on the meaning of vs. 49. The Greek is literally, "in the things of my Father;" cf. Matt. 16:23. The translations of both our versions are possible. Considerations of fitness must determine between them. The Revision is more satisfactory, because (1) the lad did not need to be in the temple to be about his Father's business; (2) the whole significance of his first visit to Jerusalem was his introduction to the house of God; (3) the answer properly indicates surprise rather than rebuke; (4) it is more natural, as will appear below.

This single incident in the youth of Jesus is intended to afford an insight into his development. The devout parents, accustomed to punctual attendance on the feast, take with them for the first time the son, who at twelve years old has become "a son of the law," of age to assume his religious duties. It is the first visit of the village boy to the metropolis; of the young Jew to Jerusalem, the city of national memories and religious significance; of the child of God to the house of God. The intense interest and fascination of these scenes to the thoughtful lad can easily be understood. Especially is his interest held by the popular and somewhat informal lectures given in the temple by the great rabbis at the feast time, a kind of university-extension work in which the learned doctors engaged for the benefit of the country people at these convenient seasons. Jesus, taking his seat among the learners at the feet of these wise men, listened eagerly to their teaching and asked the deep questions that were in his soul. The teachers, delighted with the earnest pupil, questioned him in turn and were astonished at his insight.

It has been a great loss that Jesus in this scene has ever been exhibited as a precocious youth, disputing with learned men, and even gravely giving them instruction. He was there to learn, but the lad's simple soul, never sullied, ever open to God's light, held thoughts that surprised the wise old doctors.

Absorbed in the interest of the temple, Jesus did not know that the pilgrims had started home; and, in the long straggling caravan of the kinsfolk and acquaintances, Joseph and Mary did not miss him until night. Next day they returned in great anxiety to look for him, and on the following day found him among the rabbis in the temple.

The center of interest in this narrative is in Jesus' reply to the somewhat reproachful question of his mother. It is his first recorded utterance that has come down to us. It is in truth a simple deprecation of their anxiety.

It is not to be compared with the later messianic word: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" Jesus would say that he supposed that of course they knew where he would be. He had come to Jerusalem that he might be in the house of God, whom he knew as his Father. Of necessity he must be there. He is surprised that they needed to seek him, sorrowing.

Yet this utterance is more than a reply to Mary's question, as she herself perceived. It betrays the deep religious consciousness of the young boy. Doubtless he had known God as his Father before this time. But a new realization of God, a deeper sense of sonship, a fuller religious experience, have come, which Mary cannot understand.

Then simply and naturally he returned to Nazareth, the child of God submitting with all propriety to his earthly parents. And the wonderful development, unhindered by sin, went on. He grew as really in wisdom as in stature, and the true boy became a true man.

II. MODERN APPLICATION: THE RELIGION OF A BOY

This passage may help us to understand the religion of a boy; for Jesus, while not an average boy, was a normal boy. His religious experience was natural. There is an interesting coincidence with data from our study of common boys. The religion of a boy of twelve will be—

1. *Inquiring*.—There are great questions in his heart. After all, the problems of life may be stated in simple questions, and a boy thinks of them. Do not suppress him. It is your opportunity.

2. *Enthusiastic*.—Boys do not do things by halves. If the temple captures his imagination, he will forget common things in his interest there. Again your opportunity.

3. *Spiritual*.—It may not seem the word, but it is. The center of religion is personal relation with God. The lad may know himself a son of God. Never let him know himself anything else.

4. *Dutiful*.—If a boy has any religion, he knows that it is connected with duty. Only the rhapsodical religion of a sophisticated adult would separate between religion and morality. A boy knows better.

5. *Developing*.—Religion is a germ that must grow with the body and the mind. Under right conditions, it will deepen into the sense of a great mission.

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IV. THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

MARK 1:1-11

I. EXPOSITION

This passage introduces two characters, John and Jesus, and accordingly falls into two parts. In the first (vss 2-8) John, and in the second (vss. 9-11) Jesus, is the central figure. It is the purpose of the evangelist to tell the story of the good news of Jesus Christ (vs. 1), and John is introduced because of the significance which, in the mind of the writer, he possessed for the gospel story. The entire work of John is apparently the "beginning" of which vs. 1 speaks. Vss. 2-4: It is the first concern of the writer to show that the advent of John was in accordance with prophecy. "As it is written" is to be read in close connection with the statement "John came." Although the entire quotation is attributed to Isaiah (40:3), the first part of it (vs. 2) belongs to Malachi (3:1). Moreover, neither quotation is exact. In the original of both passages, in both the Hebrew and Septuagint, preparation for the coming of Jehovah himself is announced. By a change in pronouns the evangelist makes the original proclamation herald the coming, not of Jehovah himself, but of his representative. Cf. Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27. Vs. 5: John's mission was effectual, as the nation representatively, all Judea and Jerusalem, came out to him in obedience to his preaching. His divine office was recognized; he actually prepared the way. Vs. 6: His manner of dress (2 Kings 1:8; Zech. 13:4) and his austere habits of life were suggestive of the ancient prophet and gave influence to his message. Vss. 7, 8: The central element in John's ministry of preparation was the specific prediction of one to come after him. John does not indicate who the coming one is, nor does he say that that one is to be the Messiah. He describes rather his standing and his work. John declares himself unworthy to be even the menial servant of the Mighty One, for his own work is at best but symbolic and outward, whereas that of the Coming One will be inward and real. Thus John not only indirectly, but also directly and specifically, prepares the way for the Coming One.

Vss. 9-11: The One thus heralded by John is now introduced in the first significant event of his public life, his baptism. Why Jesus came for baptism at the hands of John there is no indication, except the suggestion of silence and the implication of the entire narrative. This indirect testimony is entirely corroborated in the few passages in the gospels (Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4; Matt. 21:25; Luke 7:29, 30; Matt. 21:32; Matt. 3:14, 15) in which we have more direct evidence. We are

to understand that Jesus came to John's baptism because he recognized John as the voice of God and his baptism as God's righteous plan for his people. To submit to it was to acknowledge this righteous will and profess devotion to it, and to refuse or neglect it was to reject the counsel of God and disregard his will. Though to both Jesus and John there was a certain inappropriateness in Jesus' receiving baptism from John, yet Jesus recognized that baptism was for him duty, and insisted that the will of God should always take precedence of propriety. For his baptism then no ulterior motive or obscure reason is to be sought. It was God's will, revealed through his prophet, and for Jesus this consideration was final. In the case of others baptism was preceded by repentance and confession, but in the case of Jesus both he and John recognized these to be unnecessary.

The place which the baptism had in the career of Jesus is clearly suggested by the evangelist. The gospels are uniform in giving it a place of importance, testifying that in the act of submitting to John's baptism Jesus received a special enduement of the Spirit and assurance of a special relation to God. He was God's Son, the object of his love and approval, and, as Jesus speedily became aware, this involved a unique mission to men. Thus as Jesus responded obediently to the will of the Father, he came into a fuller consciousness of God, and received unction for, and call to, his larger public mission. On the basis of this new consciousness and enduement he is immediately brought to temptation. As John the herald was the outward preparation for Jesus' work, the baptism and its accompanying experience, the temptation, were Jesus' inner preparation.

II. SUGGESTED TEACHINGS

1. God's voice comes frequently in unexpected ways. Jesus was waiting in Nazareth for God's leading. It came through the message and ceremony of the strange prophet by the Jordan.

2. God's voice is discerned by those who are prepared. Jesus' continual endeavor to know the truth, and his devotion to the truth when known, enabled him to recognize in John's message the voice of God and to see his own duty in relation to it.

3. The result of obedience to the voice of God.

a) A sense of the divine approval and fellowship.

b) Larger service, in which there may be testing, but also victory.

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V. THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

MATT. 4:1-11

I. EXPOSITION

This was a real temptation. The source of the story is Jesus. He may have given the pictorial setting, or that may have been supplied by the disciples. It is a vivid story of an intense inner experience of Jesus.

The temptation was natural. The conviction received by Jesus at his baptism, that he was the Messiah, accompanied with the exaltation and new power of the Spirit, together with the need of a plan of action for the announcement and inauguration of the kingdom of God, furnished the basis and the occasion of the temptation. The new experience drove Jesus to solitude and intense meditation on the meaning of his new powers and the nature of the new life. It is not strange that the Spirit led into temptation. Divine providence leads all men into positions where they are tested, tempted, proven.

The successive temptations are cumulative in force. The first was an appeal to bodily appetite, on the ground that it was impossible that the Messiah should lack anything belonging to his comfort or station. Jesus does not admit that privation is impossible to the Son of God. His supreme duty is trustful obedience to God. The second temptation arose from a consideration of the question how Jesus should announce himself as the Messiah. Should he depend on God for aid in some spectacular presentation of his power to the people? But he declares he will not "put God on trial in order to see whether he can and will fulfil his promises." The third temptation is based on the common Jewish expectation that the Messiah would have outward compulsory control over the world. Should he yield to Satan, "the spirit of this world," and thus obtain enormous influence over human affairs? But Jesus replies that he will obtain influence from God alone, to whom all his allegiance is due.

The temptations are based on the expectations of the people in regard to the Messiah. Jesus dared to refuse to meet their expectations and to be the Messiah according to the will of God.

II. SUGGESTED TEACHINGS: TEMPTATION AND ITS RESISTANCE

These temptations are not peculiar to the Messiah, but are the common temptations of men. Every person must meet the temptations which are physical and material; which, legitimate in themselves, must be regulated and subordinated to the higher interests; must put reality before display; must accomplish righteous ends by honorable means, if he would

use the powers God has given him in a way which would be true to God. These temptations bring a daily battle and continue through life.

1. The physical temptation is everywhere—to escape privation, to secure comfort, to demand that the way of duty shall always include provision for the bodily needs. This physical material world and self are given man to enjoy. What shall prevent him from seeking that which God has given him? There is a larger life. He shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God—self-control, patience, virtue, service, subordination of the material to the larger activities of the soul and to the noblest career of humanity.

The temptation to use God-given power wrongfully for self-gratification or even necessities is well-nigh overpowering. This is seen in men of position, social, political, financial, ecclesiastical. Hence we see capital holding its advantages, labor using its power to intimidate and to destroy, the use of authority to control the minds and lives of men.

2. The temptation presumptuously to demand success from God. The multitude expects it; surely God ought to accredit his messenger. Here also is involved the temptation to display. Show, noise, bigness, success, tempt from solidity, genuineness, reality. This is an ecclesiastical temptation—the temptation to count numbers rather than character.

3. The insidious temptation that the end justifies the means, a compromise with conscience in order to attain a good result. This is at once the loftiest and the severest temptation. Who shall restrain himself? Having the power to bring about ends which seem benevolent to the one using it, why consider the rights of others, or the nature of the means? Here Mahomet fell. Here Charlemagne fell, who at the point of the sword made men nominal Christians. Here the church fails when it attempts to build itself up by dishonorable methods, wrong solicitations, and threats. No greater disclosure of the character of Jesus is seen anywhere than here.

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